

from Letters From an American Farmer

Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur

Although Crèvecoeur did do some farming, he was also a statesman, an explorer, and a soldier. In this letter he assumes the identity of an American farmer to speak glowingly of the opportunities available in America.

In this great American asylum, the poor of Europe have by some means met together, and in consequence of various causes; to what purpose should they ask one another what countrymen they are? Alas, two thirds of them had no country. Can a wretch who wanders about, who works and starves, whose life is a continual scene of sore affliction or pinching penury, can that man call England or any other kingdom his country? A country that had no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments; who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of this planet? No! Urged by a variety of motives, here they came. Everything has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegetative mold¹ and refreshing showers; they withered, and were mowed down by want, hunger, and war; but now by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and flourished!

Formerly they were not numbered in any civil lists² of their country, except in those of the poor; here they rank as citizens. By what invisible power has this surprising metamorphosis been performed? By that of the laws and that of their industry. The laws, the indulgent laws, protect them as they arrive, stamping on them the symbol of adoption; they receive ample rewards for their labors; these accumulated rewards procure them lands; those lands confer on them the title of freemen, and to that title every benefit is affixed which men can possibly require. This is the great operation daily performed by our laws. From whence proceed these laws? From our government. Whence the government? It is derived from the original genius and strong desire of the people ratified and confirmed by the crown. . . .

Vocabulary Development: **asylum** (uh SY luhm) *n.* place of refuge
penury (PEN yuh ree) *n.* lack of money, property, or necessities

1. **vegetative mold** enriched soil.
2. **civil lists** lists of distinguished persons.



Activate Prior Knowledge

Now and then you will see what is called an *Open Letter* in a newspaper or a magazine—often to a public figure. Think about why someone would write a letter to an individual and then make the letter public on purpose.

Reading Strategy

As you read nonfiction, it is important to distinguish between **facts**—statements that can be proven—and **opinions**—personal beliefs that cannot be proven. Reread the first paragraph. Which part of the paragraph is fact and which is opinion?

Literary Analysis

This selection is an **epistle**, or a public letter written for a wide audience. How would you describe the intended audience for Crèvecoeur's letter?

TAKE NOTES

Literary Analysis

Letters, speeches, essays, and other documents written by people who actually participated in historical events are called **primary source documents**. Crèvecoeur's letter is such a document. How does knowing that Crèvecoeur was alive during the period of history he is writing about affect your response to his letter?

Reading Check

Why does Crèvecoeur say that Americans should love this country more than the countries from which they have come?

What attachment can a poor European emigrant have for a country where he had nothing? The knowledge of the language, the love of a few kindred as poor as himself, were the only cords that tied him: his country is now that which gives him land, bread, protection, and consequence: *Ubi panis ibi patria*³ is the motto of all emigrants. What then is the American, this new man? He is either a European, or the descendant of a European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*.⁴ Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigor, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. The Americans were once scattered all over Europe: here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit. The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor; his labor is founded on the basis of nature, *self-interest*; can it want a stronger allurements? Wives and children, who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread, now, fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and to clothe them all; without any part being claimed, either by a despotic prince, a rich abbot,⁵ or a mighty lord. Here religion demands but little of him; a small voluntary

Vocabulary Development: **despotic** (de SPAHT ik) *adj.* harsh; cruel; unjust

3. *Ubi...patria* (U bee pah nis IB ee PAH tree uh) "Where there is bread, there is one's fatherland" (Latin).

4. *Alma Mater* (AHL muh MAH tuhr) "Fostering mother." Here, referring to America; usually used in reference to a school or college (Latin).

5. **abbot** *n.* the head of a monastery.

salary to the minister, and gratitude to God; can he refuse these? The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence—This is an American.

Vocabulary Development: **subsistence** (suhb SIS tuhns) *n.*
means of support

Reader's Response: How does this letter make you feel about being an American?

Thinking About the Skill: How will **distinguishing between fact and opinion** help you evaluate the nonfiction accounts that you read?



Reading Check

How is the American a new man?
